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ABSTRACT

School counselors' job descriptions leave room for many unexpected and unplanned activities. The Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland chose to address the challenge of counselors being assigned non-guidance tasks with a combination of approaches. Data collection, development of a transdisciplinary service provision model, revision of the counselor evaluation process, and building of action research skills are some of the techniques undertaken. Although the outcomes of the measures are not yet available, the approaches hold promise for boosting program accountability, enhancing awareness of contributions of the counseling programs, making suggestions for best practice, and reducing the time counselors spend on non-guidance tasks. (JDM)

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Displacing Non-Guidance Tasks and Initiating Program Improvements: Data Collection Initiatives and Program Innovations

by

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Chapter Five

Displacing Non-Guidance Tasks and Initiating Program Improvements: *Data Collection Initiatives and Program Innovations*

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Performs related duties as required.

Those words can be frightening for many of us. Taken from the job description of school counselors in the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and similar to countless descriptions of counselors' responsibilities in school systems across the nation, that open-ended phrase invites the possibility of non-guidance tasks dominating the counselor's day and impeding the implementation of a comprehensive guidance program. Secondary-school counselors tell tales of spending hours building master schedules or chasing students to encourage them to participate in community-sponsored events that depend on counselors for recruitment. Their elementary-school colleagues report that doing playground duty, providing testing accommodations, or covering classes interferes with their time with children. Although some might see any of these activities as another opportunity to talk with students, most see them as tasks unrelated to the real work of counselors. This year, MCPS has chosen to address the challenge of counselors being assigned non-guidance tasks through a combination of data collection and innovative initiatives designed to highlight the power of a fully implemented guidance program.

Montgomery County Public Schools

MCPS is a Maryland district that borders on Washington, DC, and sits 34 miles southwest of Baltimore. Our 124 elementary schools, 35 middle schools, 23 high schools, 1 career/technological high school, and 6 special

centers served an enrollment of 134,180 students in the 2000–01 school year. This record enrollment is up 3,491 from the year before, and total enrollment has grown by 47% since 1983. This growth makes us the 12th fastest growing district in the United States. As our student population increases, so does its diversity. Five of every ten students in MCPS are classified as African American, Asian American, Hispanic, or Native American. For the first time this year, no one group represents a majority of the total enrollment. The backgrounds of our students encompass 138 foreign countries and 119 different languages spoken at home. English language learners make up 8% of our school population, with the fastest growing portion of these youngsters being born in the United States. Poverty is a growing concern; 21.8% of our students qualify for free and reduced meals. Our cultural, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity is both a strength and a challenge as our district seeks to prepare students for the new information-based economy that is making unprecedented demands for a highly educated workforce.

Montgomery County citizens expect their students to achieve. The national movement to raise academic standards and student performance has touched MCPS, as it has virtually every school district nationwide. Growing national and state emphasis on standardized testing has filtered to the local community, and everyone is seeking results. In MCPS, many youngsters have experienced high success rates. Others, however, have achieved less than their academic potential. The gap in student performance by race and ethnicity is most pronounced in results for major academic assessments such as the SAT. An intensive focus on closing the achievement gap while maintaining high standards for all youngsters has been the consistent cornerstone of recent board of education priorities and superintendent initiatives in MCPS.

Guidance Program

In Montgomery County, counselors are seen as playing a key role in optimizing the educational experience for all students. Through fostering the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills and addressing barriers to learning, counselors contribute significantly to academic performance. Student-to-counselor ratios are above the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and counselor ratios have been targeted for improvement in the latest budget cycle. Currently, middle schools and high schools are staffed at an average ratio of 283:1. Each of our 124 elementary schools has a counselor, although 24 schools are still staffed with a part-time professional.

In MCPS, school counselors have delivered services under the framework

of a comprehensive developmental program since 1985. MCPS counselors, in collaboration with school staff, deliver competencies in the areas of academic achievement, educational/career development, and personal/social development to all students in pre-K to 12th grade. The four critical program components delineated by Gysbers and Henderson (2000) are well established foundations of the MCPS Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program (CGCP). Every counselor knows that each school's program is to be built upon classroom and group guidance in the county competencies, responsive counseling, individual planning, and system support. Year-end program monitoring requires reporting on needs assessment activities, program implementation, and program evaluation. New counselor induction occurs annually and is designed to ensure that our novices are as grounded in the CGCP as our veterans are.

History of Support

MCPS has a long history of providing support to school counselors so that they may use their professional expertise more effectively. In addition to a guidance secretary at each middle and high school, the high schools are staffed with two other support services staff members who assist the counseling department. Through a position established in 1965, the school registrar performs a variety of tasks in the registration and transfer of students and in the preparation and maintenance of student records and transcripts. Registrars maintain and disseminate student records and communicate with colleges, universities, national testing services, and employers about them. The career information coordinator position, first established in 1973, was staffed at each high school by the late 1970s. The career information coordinators perform specialized work in helping students explore postsecondary options. In collaboration with the school counselors, the career information coordinators develop and implement a comprehensive career guidance and career information program, including the development of a college reference facility to assist students in all aspects of college planning. The career information coordinators have unique expertise in the financial aid/scholarship process, and establish contacts in the educational and business communities essential to gathering and disseminating information about career planning and employment opportunities. The guidance secretary, registrar, and career information coordinator at the high school level are utilized in alignment with the ASCA *Position Statement* (1999) on support staff and are supervised by the resource counselor of each department. These invaluable support services personnel address many of the clerical and routine responsibilities of the counseling department, allowing the certified school counselors more time to provide services through their

comprehensive program.

Non-Guidance Task Assignments

Despite the comprehensive developmental program that forms the foundation of MCPS counseling services and the support provided by paraprofessionals, many of our counselors, particularly at the secondary level, still report that non-guidance tasks are consuming their workday. Anecdotal tales abound of being unable to serve students because of other duties deemed "related" by administrators. Numerous requests from the central administrators and community partners to involve counselors in recruiting youngsters to participate in special events—such as recognition ceremonies, festivals, information fairs, and workshops championed by a variety of community groups—threaten to swamp counselors' e-mail with an almost daily list of new "hot items." Although each individual request may not seem significant, the cumulative effect is great. Guidance Unit staff, increasingly concerned about the effect of these activities on the counselors' capacity to deliver the CGCP, are collecting data on the kind and number of community requests that demand counselor time.

Data Collection

In an attempt to develop a realistic portrait of program implementation and the impact of various responsibilities on the counselors' daily work, the MCPS Guidance Unit, in partnership with the school system's Office of Shared Accountability (OSA), has undertaken a time on tasks survey for the 2000–01 school year. Using as a starting-off point the Time and Task Analysis Form from the Missouri comprehensive program model (Starr and Gysbers, 1988, p. 93) cited by Johnson and Whitfield (Johnson and Whitfield, 1991, p. 39), specialists in the two departments crafted a study that attempts to collect data from all our school-based and ESOL counselors in a reasonable, systematic way. A questionnaire was generated that explores the time spent on individual student planning and case management, guidance curriculum, responsive counseling, school program support, and non-guidance activities such as bus duty, lunch duty, class size balancing, master schedules, etc. Each counselor was randomly assigned one workday during each quarterly marking period and asked to answer the questions in relation to that day. By the end of the school year, each counselor will complete the questionnaire four times, enabling us to gather data that yield a reasonably accurate indication of the kinds of tasks counselors perform throughout the year and how much time is spent on them.

Preliminary data have been obtained from the first two quarters of the year. During the first quarter, 251 counselors of a possible 370 responded; 248 completed the questionnaire in the second marking period, with elementary-school counselors returning the survey at a slightly higher rate than their secondary-school colleagues. OSA staff have determined that the return reflects a valid representative sample. Although these early results have not yet been disaggregated by school level, community demographics, position, or number of years in the profession, they still paint an initial picture of program implementation. As Table 1 indicates, a majority of counselors report spending their surveyed day in the delivery of key responsive program services rather than on non-guidance tasks such as doing lunch or bus duty, building a master schedule, or balancing class size. Other kinds of non-guidance tasks, such as distributing information about community activities and recruiting students to participate in them, are subsumed under the Other 1, Other 2, and Other 3 items.

Table 1. Results of Counselors' Time on Tasks Survey, 2000–01 School Year

Task	Quarter 1 % of Counselors Engaging in Task on Selected Day	Quarter 2 % of Counselors Engaging in Task on Selected Day
Implement guidance curriculum in individual classrooms	37.4	33.1
Confer with classroom teachers, parents, and administrators regarding educational needs of students	88.3	87.5
Provide individual responsive counseling to students for educational/academic concerns	67.7	68.5
Provide individual responsive counseling to students for social/emotional concerns	75.3	71.7
Provide individual responsive counseling to students for educational decision-making concerns	34.2	33.8
Provide group responsive counseling	27.0	27.0
Meet with parents about their children	66.5	66.5
Perform lunch or bus duty	3.1	2.8
Balance class size	6.2	6.0
Build a master schedule	2.0	2.4
Other 1	2.5	2.1
Other 2	5.2	2.8
Other 3	6.0	4.0

Source: MCPS Guidance Unit Time on Tasks Survey.

The survey also asks counselors to report on their involvement with standardized testing. Initial results from the first two quarters suggest that only a small percentage of our counselors are engaged in test coordination or administration, with a higher percentage counseling students about test results (see Table 2).

Table 2. Counselors' Time Spent in Standardized Testing, 2000-01 School Year

Task	Quarter 1 % of Counselors Engaging in Task on Selected Day	Quarter 2 % of Counselors Engaging in Task on Selected Day
Coordinate/administer AP, IB, MSPAP, PSAT, PLAN, ACT, MD State Functional Tests	4.6	5.2
Counsel students on assessments/achievement tests	5.0	5.2

Source: MCPS Guidance Unit Time on Tasks Survey.

Experience suggests that these percentages will change in the third and fourth quarters, when counselors play a more active rôle in the spring administration of local, state, and national assessments. Many elementary counselors in MCPS find themselves providing accommodations for youngsters with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans as schools short on support staff involve every adult not classroom bound to assist with test administration. Some middle school counselors may also provide accommodations, although that is less likely. Rarely do high school counselors provide direct services in test administration, although occasionally they are tapped as proctors. Instead, high school counselors collaborate with the career information coordinators and other school staff to make sure students understand the tests and their implications, are aware of deadlines, and are prepared for the testing experience. Although some may view counselor involvement in schoolwide testing as peripheral to guidance, these activities actually are very important in the individual planning component of the program and align with suggested competencies in the National Standards in Academic Development (Dahir, Sheldon, and Valiga, 1998, p. 9). Counselors at all levels have a key role in helping students, staff, and parents understand standardized test data. Counselors interpret test results, help all youngsters and their parents put test results into appropriate perspective and context, and help young people use the results as one tool among many in educational planning and decision making. Score reports from assessments such as the PSAT provide counselors with a useful vehicle for helping students improve achievement through applying a

metacognitive approach to error analysis and test-taking strategies. Test management and coordination may be tasks appropriately shared among school staff with the help of paraprofessionals, but using assessment results in educational goal setting is a vital function of the professional school counselor.

Because the Time on Tasks Survey data are so preliminary, it is difficult to draw conclusions from them. Questions from the first and second quarters asking counselors how much time they spend on each program component, as well as on non-guidance tasks, have yet to be thoroughly analyzed. Additional information from the third and fourth quarters must be collected and studied. When the Time on Tasks Survey is completed at the end of the school year, Guidance Unit and OSP staff will analyze the results carefully. Trends tied to time of year, school level, years of experience, school demographics, and other variables will be spotlighted and used for staff development for both counselors and administrators, as well as for program planning. Obstacles to program implementation, including the proliferation of non-guidance tasks, will be identified through survey data and coupled with information gleaned from the year-end program reports required of every counselor. Guidance Unit leaders and representatives from all school counseling venues, in collaboration with school administrators, will use the data analysis to highlight appropriate next steps to ensure a more thorough implementation of the CGCP during the 2001–02 school year.

Program Innovations

Besides continuing to collect and analyze Time on Tasks Survey results, our district is engaging in a number of other activities designed to minimize counselors' involvement in non-guidance activities while enhancing the appropriate application of their unique expertise.

Restructuring the Department of Student Services

As part of the school system's urgent agenda to close the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups, a major restructuring of the Department of Student Services (DSS), the department that houses school counseling, is underway. This initiative emphasizes the importance of transdisciplinary service delivery involving school counselors, psychologists, pupil personnel workers, and nurses. The model stresses the need for a continuum of services for students, ranging from prevention to early intervention, intensive intervention, and crisis support. Developed collaboratively among the disciplines and with community partners, this service model will guide the work of DSS staff for the near future. As program accountability is refined, focus will be placed

increasingly on those services that foster student achievement, while activities that do not support a successful school experience will be de-emphasized or eliminated. Non-guidance tasks will be under further scrutiny.

Conducting Professional Performance Evaluations

At the same time, MCPS counselors, along with their colleagues from other disciplines, are collaborating with colleagues in the Department of Human Resources and the teachers' union to accomplish a major revision of the professional evaluation process. A work group of counselors has generated a series of standards, performance criteria, and exemplars to be used to evaluate their professional effectiveness. Although this process is still evolving, it promises to have a substantial effect on improving practice. The emphasis is on best practices that are tied to program implementation, are observable, and are applicable to all settings. Training for school administrators is planned for the 2001–02 school year so that each principal will be aware of the counseling standards and how they may be demonstrated. The revised process highlights the comprehensive developmental guidance program and concentrates the evaluation on the most essential aspects of the counselor's role. Counselors participating in the work group are passionate in their commitment to the very best in counseling and hope that this evaluation vehicle will help them move more and more non-guidance tasks from their plates.

Making Targeted Improvements Based on Action Research

In addition to these exciting initiatives, MCPS counselors are embarking on yet another endeavor that promises to support an emphasis on significant guidance activities rather than non-guidance tasks. An intrepid group of counselors has established an action research group with expert guidance from the Office of School Performance and the Office of Instruction and Program Development. These pioneers are using needs assessments and school data to identify a specific problem they wish to address, reviewing relevant literature, implementing an intervention, and then gauging its effectiveness through the collection of student performance data. They meet regularly to deepen their understanding of the action research model, build and refine skills, coach one another through any challenges that arise, and applaud one another's successes. The group has showcased their results at a year-end Best Practices Resource Fair held in May 2001 for all school counselors. By learning, practicing, and modeling the action research approach, this bold group

of counselors is providing their colleagues with a tool that can be used to demonstrate program effectiveness. As more and more counselors are able to connect their program with student outcomes, the value of a fully realized comprehensive developmental program will become increasingly evident to administrators, parents, students, and to counselors themselves. Fewer and fewer will tolerate spending precious professional time and talent on non-guidance tasks when well-implemented programs are shown to support student success.

Summary

As a group, counselors are perceived as flexible, friendly professionals always willing to help, no matter what the task. Far too often, this has resulted in "related duties as required" expanding to consume counselors' time and thwart the effective implementation of the comprehensive guidance and counseling program. This year, MCPS has chosen to confront this issue by mounting a multipronged approach that includes data collection, development of a transdisciplinary service provision model, revision of the counselor evaluation process, and building of action research skills. Although results of these initiatives are not yet available, these exciting activities promise to boost program accountability; enhance stakeholder awareness of the vital contribution counseling programs make to student success; suggest staff development themes to sustain best practices; and ultimately reduce the amount of time certified, well-trained counseling professionals spend on non-guidance tasks. Other guidance leaders seeking to address the concern of counselors being overwhelmed with non-guidance tasks must begin with data collection to assess the problem. Once the challenge has been defined, it will be tackled most productively through a variety of approaches designed to underscore the relationship between the successful implementation of a comprehensive developmental program and student achievement.

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